



Kittitas County Conservation District

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December 14, 2005

Representative Frank Chopp, Speaker of the House
444 Ravenna Blvd, Suite 106
Seattle, WA 98115

Dear Speaker Chopp:

On behalf of the Board of Supervisors for the Kittitas County Conservation District, I would like to thank you for your visit to Kittitas County in September. We appreciated the opportunity to share with you the needs of our citizens and community.



*Hansen Farm
September 8, 2005*

Per your request of our District Manager Anna Lael, we are including with this letter a proposal for a "Drought Assistance Program". We do not want this proposal to be viewed as a replacement for the current Irrigation Efficiencies Program (IEP) administered by the Washington Conservation Commission. IEP is a successful program in Kittitas County that has upgraded irrigation systems on more than 2,000 acres since 2002. Because of strong ties to ESA listed fish however, IEP cannot provide assistance to those hardest hit by the 2001 and 2005 droughts.

For example, in Kittitas County the people hit the hardest by these droughts include families like Mark & Melissa Hansen, whose farm you visited in September. This year they received only 42% of their annual supply of irrigation water through the Kittitas Reclamation District (KRD). Their farm and the majority of the other 59,000 acres under KRD are not eligible given the current requirements of the IEP. They would be eligible for the proposed Drought Assistance Program.

Please feel free to contact Anna or the Board of Supervisors directly regarding this proposal. We look forward to working with you.

Sincerely,

Mark A. Moore, Chair
Kittitas County Conservation District Board of Supervisors

Encl: Drought Assistance Proposal

CC: 13th Dist. Representative Bill Hinkle

13th Dist. Senator Joyce Mulliken

Larry Cordas, Chelan County Conservation District

Dirk Van Slagren, South Yakima Conservation Dist.

Rich Bartkowski, Central Klickitat Conservation Dist.

Jim Jesernig, WACD Lobbyist

Urban Eberhart, Kittitas Reclamation District

13th Dist. Representative Janea Holmquist

Ivan Oberg, Okanogan Conservation District

Dave Alden, North Yakima Conservation District

Nicole Berg, Benton Conservation District

Fred Colvin, WACD President

Kevin Eslinger, Kittitas County Farm Bureau

Drought Assistance Program Proposal

Decision Package Code/Title: Drought Assistance Program

Budget Period: July 1, 2006 – June 30, 2007

Budget Level: \$5,000,000

Summary:

Washington State Agriculture is a \$5 billion industry in Washington State. Many areas of the state rely heavily upon irrigation to grow a multitude of high value crops. Much of the irrigation infrastructure, particularly on the east slopes of the Cascades is approaching, or is more than a century old. During the past several years the state has experienced drought conditions leaving some irrigators little choice but to let fields go fallow or dormant. The impacts of a drought often follow the producers and their communities into subsequent years, as they try to reestablish their crops and production levels.

This program recommends a new program be established to assist producers dealing with severe shortages of irrigation water due to drought. The goal of this program is to offer technical assistance and cost-share to producers with irrigated land for the purpose of converting older, less efficient, irrigation systems into site specific designed irrigation systems. This will result in a stronger agricultural industry, and stronger rural communities, as well as saved water that may increase flow in many streams and improved water quality benefiting aquatic life.

Package Description:

program or activity

Technical assistance will be provided to private landowners following voluntary requests. Technical assistance will include soil and crop inventory to determine irrigation needs, evaluation of current irrigation system to establish a base efficiency, reviewing new irrigation system designs to ensure higher efficiency, developing irrigation water management plans which provide producers with specific information on irrigation timing, and overall project management.

proposed implementation plan

Funding will be distributed to Districts for providing voluntary technical assistance to producers with irrigation systems. First, grants will be distributed to Districts to provide technical assistance and outreach activities to inform the public of the availability of the program. Following site evaluations and producer completion of cost-share agreements between the producer and the District, cost-share funds will be distributed to Districts for specific projects on a first-come first-served basis until funds are depleted.

▪ strategy & importance to state

This program will, for the first time in Washington, provide a comprehensive irrigation efficiency program to drought stricken producers on a voluntary basis. The program will be completely voluntary for those wishing to participate. Implementation of the program will have far reaching environmental and economic impacts for many areas of Washington. Increased irrigation efficiencies will lead to increased stream flows, improved water quality, and additional habitat for all aquatic species (including ESA

listed species). Economic benefits will include reduced labor costs for producers, increased crop production in drought conditions, and improved crop quality.

narrative justification & impact statement

Washington State has more than 7,000,000 irrigated acres according to the 2002 Ag Census. Thousands of these acres went without necessary irrigation water for all or part of the 2005 growing season due to drought. USDA Farm Bill programs have helped many producers in Washington State however; there are too many priorities and not enough funds in these programs to meet the requests.

The Washington State Conservation Commission Irrigation Efficiencies Program (IEP) has had significant impact in a few selected basins, however, current rules of the program limit the areas that are eligible to participate within the state and within specific eligible watersheds. While this is a great program that has been very effective in some areas of the state, it is tied too closely to creating ESA listed fish species habitat to help those hardest hit by the 2005 drought. Applicants for the IEP must either draw water from a priority stream or provide a significant level of fish benefit on a low or non-priority stream to justify the project. For example, in the Kittitas Valley, nearly all of the dozen or so funded IEP projects have been in the lowest reaches of the tributaries to the Yakima River (where there is known spawning or rearing habitat) and the applicant's right is for water in those streams. However, the irrigators hardest hit in Kittitas County by 2001 and 2005 droughts are those whose entire irrigation water supply is provided by the Kittitas Reclamation District (KRD). In 2005, the KRD's 59,000 acres received only 42% of their regular allocation and in 2001 it was only 37%, while irrigators in the areas where IEP projects are occurring received between 70 and 100% of their normal supply. The KRD irrigators are generally the furthest upstream on the tributaries with numerous fish passage barriers between them and the known spawning and rearing habitat in the lower reaches. It would be impossible to qualify IEP projects on their lands with the current requirements of the program.

In Okanogan County, many applicants for the IEP program were turned away because their water rights are small relative to the size of the streams or rivers from which they draw. This means that a significant water savings on-farm due to improved irrigation systems would not be significant in terms of fish habitat (i.e. adding 1.0 cubic feet per second of saved water to a 50 cubic feet per second stream or river would not provide significant habitat gains). Another hurdle in Okanogan County for applicants in the IEP is getting approval from their irrigation district or company to participate in the program. The IEP requires the water right or permit applicant to sign the agreement. District staff and producers alike have approached these entities to gain their approval and have been denied in every case.

This new program will allow many more irrigated lands to be enrolled, thereby increasing the efficiency of water use and diminishing the short and long-term impacts of drought conditions on the individual irrigators, their local communities and the state as a whole.

performance measure detail (goal(s) & objectives & early action plan)

Performance measures will be gauged by the overall efficiency increase. Existing irrigation systems will be rated on their overall water delivery efficiency and this will be

cross checked against the overall water delivery efficiency of new systems. This will provide information on the net increase in saved water.

- **impact on clients and services**

Irrigation systems can be very expensive for family owned farms to capitalize into their farm. Due to significant increases in fuel and steel costs over the past 24 months, irrigators have seen a dramatic increase in new system costs. Systems that were barely attainable two years ago are out of reach financially for many growers. This program will assist producers to make these needed changes.

- **impact on other state programs**

This program will not have an adverse impact upon other State programs. Rather, we believe it will increase awareness of the importance of irrigation system improvements, increase productivity, and thereby increase profits to producers. These improvements for the producers will be a stabilizing influence in the agricultural economy.

- **required changes to existing RCW, WAC, contract, or plan**

There are no required changes to implement this project. This program is designed to assist irrigated agriculture producers to comply with existing RCWs, WACs, and local ordinances.

- **alternatives explored by agency**

Alternatives such as: USDA Farm Bill Programs have been actively implemented for several decades including the most recent Farm Bill in which funding has increased dramatically. However, this has only increased the demand for more efficient systems and there continues to be a significant shortfall in funding to implement every producers request for irrigation system upgrades. The Washington State Conservation Commission's Irrigation Efficiency Program is limited to 16 specific watersheds and its rules are restrictive enough that many producers who have applied in several eligible watersheds were turned away for a lack of increase or improvement in salmon habitat.

This program is necessary to add to the projects funded from these two sources to get greater efficiencies statewide.

- **budget impacts in future biennium**

This project is anticipated to have great demand, thereby requiring a follow-up program equal to or greater than this request in future biennia. The increasing demand for water resources, matched with the number of irrigated lands that have irrigations systems that are decades or even a century old, will require an ongoing commitment for at least three biennia.

- **effects of non-funding**

If not funded, planning or technical assistance for irrigated lands will be limited to what the USDA can assist with and to a very finite number of producers that may qualify for the Washington State Conservation Commission's Irrigation Efficiency program. Without both significant technical and financial assistance, fields will

continue to be fallowed and taken out of production during low water or drought years. This will have a domino effect on local economies, as well as the State's economy because of the reduced production and loss of agricultural sales. In addition, many of the areas affected by drought are also seeing increased development pressures. Many producers are weighing their options for selling parts or entire farms to developers when fields go fallow or the costs of production (including irrigation costs) dictate the necessity of selling land so they may stay in business.

expenditure calculations and assumptions

Five million dollars will be sent out to districts as grants from the Conservation Commission based on a formula that includes highest priorities and greatest need due to lack of other funding sources.

The Commission will develop a formula in consultation with Conservation Districts for funding distribution across the state. The formula will incorporate public benefit, prioritization of need, and feasibility to accomplish workload.